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## EAST OF THE TRINITY: GLIMPSES OF LIFE IN EAST TEXAS IN THE EARLY 1850s

By Ralph A. Wooster

In his study *Migration Into East Texas, 1835-1860*, Barnes F. Lathrop points out that half of the 1850 Texas population lived in the thirty-two counties that lay east of the Trinity River.<sup>1</sup> This region, bordered by the Sabine on the east, the Red River on the north and the Gulf of Mexico on the south, constituted what was known as East Texas in the days of the Republic and early statehood. Many early Texans considered those counties lying west of the Trinity but east of the Brazos, an area generally considered as a part of East Texas today,<sup>2</sup> a part of "Middle" or "Central" Texas.<sup>3</sup>

The entire state of Texas was growing rapidly in population during the 1850s, with the majority of new settlers coming from the states of the Old South. The various river crossings on the Sabine and Red Rivers were the scene of great activity in the early fifties. Newspaper editors in East Texas towns commented on the activity as new immigrants entered the area, some to settle permanently and others to rest briefly while repairing a wagon before pushing on toward the Brazos or Colorado. "For the last two weeks," wrote editor Charles DeMorse of the *Clarksville Northern Standard* in November, 1850, "scarcely a day has passed that a dozen or more mover's wagons have not passed through our town."<sup>4</sup>

Barnes Lathrop estimates that between seven and eight thousand people migrated into the area east of the Trinity each year in the early 1850s.<sup>5</sup> The majority of these new settlers came from Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Missouri. Most of them were of Anglo-Saxon stock, although Jefferson County on the coast was already receiving its Pevotos, Chaissons, Guidrys, Heberts, Blanchettes, Broussards, and Jirous from Acadian Louisiana.<sup>6</sup> Foreign immigrants to Texas in the period of early statehood generally settled in the towns and on the farms west of the Trinity, but a small colony of Norwegians located in Henderson county in 1846 and a second group settled near the Kaufman-Van Zandt county line in 1848.<sup>7</sup>

Slightly over one-fourth of the East Texans, 27.6 per cent, in this period were Negro slaves.<sup>8</sup> Ten counties, Bowie, Cass, Cherokee, Harrison, Lamar, Nacogdoches, Panola, Red River, Rusk, and San Augustine, each had over one thousand slaves in 1850, but only in Bowie and Harrison did slaves constitute over fifty per cent of the total population. One hundred and forty-two of the state's 397 free blacks also lived in the counties east of the Trinity. Sixty-two of these free blacks, most members of the Ashworth family, lived in one county, Jefferson: thirty-one, including perhaps the best known free person of color in the state, William Goyens, lived in Nacogdoches, and twenty-four lived in Angelina.<sup>9</sup>

Although a majority of East Texans lived on farms and plantations, the cities and towns were the centers of commercial and cultural activities. Marshall, county seat of Harrison county, was the largest town east of the Trinity and the fifth largest town in the state in 1850.<sup>10</sup> Known as the "Athens of

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East Texas," Marshall was the site of numerous churches, lyceums, two colleges, Marshall University and the Masonic Female Institute, and the only public library in East Texas.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the Marshall Histrionic Society, formed in early 1850, gave weekly performances that were well attended and received by the local citizenry.<sup>12</sup>

Nacogdoches, one of the oldest settlements in Texas, was a town of nearly 500 inhabitants in 1850 and considered by most travelers and visitors one of the most attractive. The northern traveler Frederick L. Olmsted, who visited the city in December, 1853, was particularly impressed. "The houses along the road at the entrance to the village stand in gardens and are neatly painted," he wrote, "and the first exterior signs of cultivation of mind since the Red River."<sup>13</sup> The neighboring town of San Augustine, Olmsted found less attractive:

It is a town of perhaps fifty or sixty houses, and half a dozen shops. Most of the last front upon a central square acre of neglected mud. The dwellings are clapboarded and of much higher class than plantation dwellings. As to the people, a resident told us there was but one man in the town that was not in the constant habit of getting drunk and that this gentleman relaxed his Puritanic severity during our stay in view of the fact that Christmas came but once a year.<sup>14</sup>

Olmsted, of course, visited San Augustine several years after the town had reached its peak. The Regulator-Moderator feud of the early 1840s had taken a heavy toll on the city's commerce, and, according to William Seale, "the town never recovered the glory it had built during the early years of the Texas Republic."<sup>15</sup> Even so, it is surprising that Olmsted failed to comment upon the lively cultural and social life of the city or the architectural accomplishments of New England master carpenter-architect Augustus Phelps in the lovely homes and commercial establishments of San Augustine. Melinda Rankin, a young teacher from New England, was much more favorable to San Augustine, of which she wrote:

Its situation is pleasant, and a good degree of taste is manifested in its arrangement. The residences are ornamented with shade trees, shubbery and flowers, which give the place a very agreeable and imposing appearance. More attention has been paid to this department of improvement than is usually seen in Texas.<sup>16</sup>

Clarksville, an educational and agricultural center near the Red River, was one of the most flourishing towns in Northeast Texas. The home of McKenzie College, a Female Academy and a Female Institute, Clarksville made a favorable impression upon most visitors.<sup>17</sup> One young man not so impressed was Alfred Thomas Howell, a Tennessean, who wrote "the inhabitants of this county are generally people of broken fortunes, and they have emigrated here to build up their losses. They are bound together only by the tie of interest, and are friendly only when there is something to be gained."<sup>18</sup> Young Howell was particularly critical of the morals of the townspeople; "you never saw or heard of such women. . . . as we have here, swearing and slander is their especial delight," he wrote. And of the failure to observe the Sabbath, he noted "every doggery (saloon), billard table, ten-pin-alley is used as much then as at any time almost."<sup>19</sup>

Paris, Palestine, Rusk, Jefferson, Henderson, Tyler, Crockett, Beaumont, Sabine Pass, and Mt. Pleasant were the other principal East Texas towns, but their size is difficult to determine as the Federal Census enumerators frequently

made no distinction between town and rural areas. The *Texas Almanac* estimates that Palestine had 2,000 inhabitants and that Paris and Tyler had over 1,000, but these figures undoubtedly include people living outside town.<sup>20</sup> The printed Federal Census shows only 212 people in Palestine and fails to list Tyler and Paris among the major towns and cities for 1850.<sup>21</sup> In his diary, Adolphus Sterne of Nacogdoches, who visited Tyler in 1851, described that town as "nothing but a country village at best."<sup>22</sup> Crockett, located on the old San Antonio Road, was a town that impressed few travelers. Amelia Matilda Murray, maid of honor to Queen Victoria, liked neither the hotel accommodations nor the manners of the townspeople there, and Edwin Welsh Bush, a young visitor in 1852, thought Crockett to be "a poor looking place" surrounded by worthless land.<sup>23</sup>

Visitors and permanent residents alike agreed that travel in early East Texas was difficult. Adolphus Sterne noted that the road between Crockett and Rusk was very bad in the spring of 1851 and Britisher Edward Smith reported that all the roads of East Texas were primitive.<sup>24</sup> Franklin B. Sexton, a young lawyer from San Augustine, described poor roads in Newton county in February, 1850 and complained that high water caused frequent delays and inconveniences to the traveler.<sup>25</sup> In his journal Frederick L. Olmsted mentioned not only poor roads and high water but also noted that wild hogs bothered campers at night.<sup>26</sup> One visitor, Edward Smith, complained of mosquitoes in the heavily wooded areas and along the river bottoms of the region.<sup>27</sup> Smith did believe, however, that Northeast Texas was free of mosquitoes; a view not shared by the editor of the Clarksville *Northern Standard* who complained that summer evenings were spoiled by the presence of mosquitoes. In a bit of levity editor DeMorse passed on to his readers a recipe that a Yankee friend gave him for dealing with the mosquito: "Catch a Mosquito, and hold him by the back of his or her neck until you succeed in opening his or her mouth, then titilate his or her mouth with Scotch Snuff until he or she sneezes his or her head off."<sup>28</sup>

Eating and drinking habits of East Texans were mentioned by most visitors. Amelia Matilda Murray, "the Queen's Lady," observed that milk and butter were seldom served and that "one hardly sees cream in America—never in this State."<sup>29</sup> Edward Smith, on the other hand, reported that "water and thick buttermilk are drunk universally and in large quantities; but the whiskey drinking habit has arisen from the low price of the article."<sup>30</sup> Frederick Olmsted, who was generally critical of Texas and Texans, described a meal eaten near Liberty as consisting of "fresh beef, cornbread, and coffee."<sup>31</sup> He added, however, that "on a side-table stood a decanter of whiskey out of which all, men and boys, had a pull on entering."

Britisher Edward Smith was impressed by the high morality and interest in religion he found in East Texas. "On many occasions," he wrote, "our host asked a blessing on our food, and sometimes we saw him reading his testament before entering upon his daily duties."<sup>32</sup> The majority of East Texans he found were members of evangelical Protestant congregations, an impression borne out by census data which shows that of the 220 churches in the counties east of the Trinity in 1850 one hundred six were Methodist, sixty-three Baptist, and thirty-six were Presbyterian.<sup>33</sup> The census also listed five Christian churches, five "Free" churches (four in Cherokee and one in Shelby county), three minor sectarian churches (all in Fannin), one Episcopal and one Roman Catholic (both in Nacogdoches).

Education was of vital interest to early East Texans. In addition to the colleges previously mentioned, there were thirty-four academies located in the counties east of the Trinity in 1850. These institutions, comparable in many ways to a modern preparatory school of a community college, enrolled over a thousand pupils in 1850 and employed forty-six teachers.<sup>34</sup> There were also some 210 public schools in the area. Practically all of these were the one-room, one teacher variety so common in nineteenth century America, as the census lists only 213 teachers in the 210 schools. Four thousand two hundred and ninety-three children were enrolled in these schools; 54.3 per cent of the total number of students enrolled in Texas public schools in 1850.<sup>35</sup>

Like the rest of Texas, the counties east of the Trinity depended heavily upon agriculture. While corn, wheat, rice, and tobacco were grown primarily for local consumption, cotton was the major export crop in early East Texas.<sup>36</sup> Bowie, Cass, Cherokee, Harrison, Lamar, Rusk, and San Augustine, all counties with a large slave population, were the major cotton producing counties. Indeed, Harrison, which produced nearly one-fourth of the cotton in the area, was the second largest cotton producing county in the state in the early 1850s.

In a scholarly study of slaveholding in Harrison county, Randolph Campbell has shown how increasingly important slave labor was to the cotton economy of early East Texas.<sup>37</sup> Slaves were used on both plantations and farms but the bulk of East Texas cotton was produced on the plantations of the area. The United States Census for 1850 lists 272 East Texans who owned twenty slaves or more and could thus properly be classified as "planters." Nearly thirty per cent of these, 92, lived in Harrison county.<sup>38</sup> Bowie, with twenty-four planters, and Cass, with twenty-two, were the only other East Texas counties in which twenty or more planters resided in 1850. Among the particularly large plantation operations in the early 1850s were those of W. T. Scott, who owned 103 slaves in Harrison county, Willis Whitaker, who owned plantations with over eighty slaves in Bowie and Cass counties, and Julien Sidney Devereux, who owned seventy-five slaves on his Monte Verdi plantation in Rusk county.<sup>39</sup>

East Texas industry was tied closely to agriculture and timber products. Of the forty-six saw mills in the area the largest were the Spartan Mill at Sabine Pass in Jefferson county, the S. J. Richardson Mill of Harrison county, and Montgomery Wilkerson & Company of Red River county. The Wilkerson Mill had a capital investment of \$23,000, employed eighteen workers, and annually turned out one million feet of lumber. The Richardson mill of Harrison county, with a \$14,000 capital investment and twelve employees, also had an annual production of one million feet of lumber. The Spartan Mill at Sabine Pass, owned and operated by David Bradbury of Galveston and Orin Brown, Isaiah Ketchum, and Benjamin Granger of Sabine, had a capital investment of only \$12,000 but annually turned out 200,000 more feet of lumber than either the Wilkerson or Richardson mill.<sup>40</sup>

In all, some 133 industrial establishments are listed in the 1850 census returns for East Texas. These range from tanneries, grist mills, and iron foundries employing several workers to one-man cabinet, blacksmith, and shoe shops.<sup>41</sup> One of the most versatile East Texas entrepreneurs was Charles Vinzent, thirty-four year old Rusk county merchant, who maintained a tin shop, tannery, blacksmith shop, saddlery, and wool cordery in 1850. Vinzent employed twenty-one workers in his establishments and turned out annual products whose value was estimated at \$44,000.<sup>42</sup>

Merchants such as Vinson, I. D. Thomas and Matthew Cartwright of San Augustine, S. F. Mosley of Cass, R. F. Mitchell of Cherokee, and T. A. Ford of Nacogdoches, were leaders in their communities in the early 1850s. Lawyers were also among the leaders of early East Texas society. San Augustine, in particular, had an array of legal talent, including in 1850 O. M. Roberts, J. Pinckney Henderson, William G. Anderson, and Henry W. Sublett. In all, fourteen lawyers resided in the town in 1850 — probably more lawyers for its size than any other town in the state!<sup>43</sup> In part this was due to the speculation in land. William Seale has pointed out that "land transactions called by lawyers, who took acreage in fee, sometimes amassing giant, though scattered and poorly surveyed, land inventories."<sup>44</sup>

Interest in land was an abiding passion with many early East Texans. The Seventh U. S. Census lists fifty-seven individuals who owned over \$20,000 in real property in 1850. Among the largest of these landholders were T. Jefferson Chambers, lawyer from Liberty county and a pioneer Texas settler, Frost Thorn of Nacogdoches, whose occupation is not listed in the Federal census, C. C. Mills of Harrison, a wealthy plantation owner, Anthony McCusion, planter in Lamar county, J. H. Lawrence, physician in Cherokee county, and L. E. Griffith, physician in Sabine county, all of whom listed \$60,000 or more in real property in 1850.

The majority of East Texans were of course not so fortunate as the aforementioned individuals. The typical East Texan was a farmer who owned only a small tract of land which he tilled to produce food for the family table or to barter for calico, coffee, or flour. Barnes F. Lathrop has found that the median family holding in real estate for residents of ten to twenty years was only \$870 and that about one-half of the total real estate holdings in East Texas belonged to the wealthier 13 per cent of the families.<sup>46</sup> Even so, the spirit of the people in the region remained high and most East Texans in the early 1850s looked hopefully to the future. Few could foresee the gathering clouds of conflict that would soon erupt in a bloody civil war.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Barnes F. Lathrop, *Migration Into East Texas, 1835-1860: A Study from the United States Census (Austin, 1949), 23-24. Dallas, Denton, and Cooke counties, all to the west of the East Fork of the Trinity, are not included in Lathrop's study nor are they considered in East Texas in the present paper.*

<sup>2</sup>See Walter P. Webb and H. Bailey Carroll (eds.), *The Handbook of Texas* (2 vols.; Austin, 1952), 534-535.

<sup>3</sup>See Melinda Rankin, *Texas In 1850* (Reprint; Waco, 1966), 170-171.

<sup>4</sup>Clarksville *Northern Standard*, November 2, 1850.

<sup>5</sup>Lathrop, *Migration Into East Texas*, 74.

<sup>6</sup>Mary M. Withers, "The Acadians of Jefferson County," *Texas Gulf Historical and Biographical Record*, VII (November, 1971), 43-44. See also W. T. Block and W. D. Quick, "The 1850 Manuscript Census Schedules for Jefferson County, Texas," *ibid.*, VII (May, 1972), 66-67.

<sup>7</sup>See Darwin Payne, "Early Norwegians in Northeast Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, LXV (October, 1951), 196-203.

<sup>8</sup>*Seventh Census of the United States, 1850 . . .* (Washington, 1853), 501-502.

<sup>9</sup>For the free Negro in East Texas and elsewhere in the state, see Virginia C. Mooror, "The Free Negro in Texas, 1845-1860" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Lamar State College of Technology, 1969). For information on the Ashworths see Andrew Forest Muir, "The Free Negro in Jefferson and Orange Counties, Texas," *The Journal of Negro History*, XXXV (April, 1950), 183-206. For William Goyens, see Diane Prince, "William Goyens, Free Negro on the Texas Frontier" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Stephen F. Austin State College, 1967).

<sup>10</sup>The 1850 population for Marshall was 1,189, *Seventh Census of United States, 1850 . . .*, 504.

<sup>11</sup>Sallie M. Lentz, "Highlights of Early Harrison County," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, LXI (October, 1957), 240-256; *Texas Republican*, May 16, 1850; and *Seventh Census of United States, 1850 . . .*, 521.

<sup>12</sup>*Texas Republican*, February 14, 1850. Among the early presentations by the society were *The Idiot Witness, Or A Tale of Blood; Fortune's Frolic: The Stranger; Animal Magnetism; Pizarro, Or the Death of Rolla; and The Loan of A Lover. ibid.*, February 14, 21, April 4, 18, May 2, 1850.

<sup>13</sup>Frederick L. Olmsted, *A Journey Through Texas, A Saddle-Trip on the Southwestern Frontier* (Reprint; Austin, 1962), 27.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>15</sup>William Seale, "San Augustine, In the Texas Republic," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, LXXII (January, 1969), 356.

<sup>16</sup>Rankin, *Texas In 1850*, 101-102. See also George Louis Crockett, *Two Centuries in East Texas: A History of San Augustine County and Surrounding Territory From 1685 To The Present Time* (Dallas, 1932), 108, 219-220; San Augustine *Red-Lander*, July 22, 1854.

<sup>17</sup>See for example Edward Smith, "Account of A Journey Through Northeastern Texas," *East Texas Historical Journal*, VII (October, 1969), 105. For a description of McKenzie College see John D. Osburn, "McKenzie College," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, LXIII (April, 1960), 533-553.

<sup>18</sup>William E. Sawyer, "A Young Man Comes to Texas in 1852," *Texana*, VII (Spring, 1969), 23.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>20</sup>*Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide, 1970-1971* (Dallas, 1969), 171-175.

<sup>21</sup>See *Seventh Census of United States, 1850* . . . , 504.

<sup>22</sup>Adolphus Sterne, *Hurrah for Texas! The Diary of Adolphus Sterne, 1838-1851*, ed. Archie P. McDonald (Waco, 1969), 215.

<sup>23</sup>"The Queen's Lady in Texas," ed. Marilyn McAdams Sibley, *East Texas Historical Journal*, VI (October, 1968), 115; "The Texas Diary of Edwin Welsh Bush, 1852-1854," *ibid.*, V (October, 1967), 95.

<sup>24</sup>Sterne, *Hurrah for Texas!*, 211; Edward Smith, "Account of a Journey Through Northeast Texas," *East Texas Historical Journal*, VII (March, 1969), 37.

<sup>25</sup>Mary S. Estill, "Travels and Tribulations of a Young East Texas Lawyer, 1849-50," *ibid.*, III (March, 1965), 52.

<sup>26</sup>Olmsted, *Journey Through Texas*, 33.

<sup>27</sup>Smith, "Account of a Journey Through Northeast Texas," *East Texas Historical Journal*, VII (October, 1969), 92.

<sup>28</sup>Clarksville *Northern Standard*, August 24, 1850.

<sup>29</sup>"The Queen's Lady in Texas," *East Texas Historical Journal*, 115.

<sup>30</sup>Smith, "Account of a Journey Through Northeast Texas," *East Texas Historical Journal*, VII (October, 1969), 102.

<sup>31</sup>Olmsted, *Journey Through Texas*, 231. See also Marilyn McAdams Sibley, *Travelers in Texas, 1761-1860* (Austin, 1967), 47.

<sup>32</sup>Smith, "Account of a Journey Through Northeast Texas," *East Texas Historical Journal*, VII (October, 1969), 109.

<sup>33</sup>*Seventh Census of the United States, 1850* . . . , 522-525. Fannin County, with thirty-five churches, had the largest number of congregations of any county.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 510. Cass county, with ten academies, ten teachers, and three hundred forty pupils, was the center of this type educational training in early East Texas. For more on education in East Texas see B. W. Martin, "Some Early Educational Institutions in East Texas" (M.A. thesis, University of Texas, 1924), and R. B. Martin, "Early Schools in Jasper County," *East Texas Historical Journal*, III (March, 1965), 59-62.

<sup>35</sup>*Seventh Census of the United States, 1850* . . . , 508-509. The largest number of pupils were enrolled in Fannin, Cass, and Harrison counties.

<sup>36</sup>The area produced 21,934 bales of cotton, 3,059,398 bushels of corn, 22,343 pounds of tobacco, 86,232 pounds of rice, and 27,902 bushels of wheat in 1849. *Ibid.*, 515-518.



<sup>37</sup>Randolph Campbell, "Slaveholding in Harrison County, 1850-1860: A Statistical Profile," *East Texas Historical Journal*, XI (Spring, 1973), 18-27.

<sup>38</sup>Based upon examination of the manuscript returns of Schedule No. 2, Slave Population, of the Seventh U.S. Census, 1850. Readers must be cautioned, of course, that census data is imperfect. Not only is the writing dim and in places nearly illegible but the enumerators themselves were oftentimes careless in completing the forms.

<sup>39</sup>For Devereux see Dorman Winfrey, *Julien Sidney Devereux and His Monte Verdi Plantation* (Waco, 1962).

<sup>40</sup>Based upon manuscript returns for Schedule No. 5, Products of Industry, Seventh U.S. Census, 1850. For more on the Spartan Mill see Block and Quick, "Manuscript Census Schedules For Jefferson County, Texas," 69-70, 73.

<sup>41</sup>For examples of East Texas industry see Rosine McFaddin Wilson, "The John Jay French Trading Post," *East Texas Historical Journal*, VIII (March, 1970), 14-23; Robert L. Jones, "The First Iron Furnace in Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, LXIII (October, 1959), 279-289; and Raymond E. White, "Cotton Ginning in Texas to 1861," *ibid.*, LXI (October, 1957), 257-269.

<sup>42</sup>Manuscript returns, Schedules No. 1, 2, and 5, Seventh U.S. Census, 1850, Rusk County. Vinzent had \$7,800 capital investment in his enterprises. He is listed in Schedule No. 1 as owning \$22,000 in real property and in Schedule No. 2 as owning ten slaves. His name is spelled "Vinzent" in the census schedules, but he is identified as "Vinson" in Dorman Winfrey, *A History of Rusk County, Texas* (Waco, 1961), 33, 110.

<sup>43</sup>Based upon manuscript returns, Schedule No. 1, Seventh U. S. Census, 1850, San Augustine County. San Augustine also had physicians living within the town limits in 1850.

<sup>44</sup>Seale, "San Augustine, In the Texas Republic," 352.

<sup>45</sup>Manuscript returns, Seventh U.S. Census, 1850.

<sup>46</sup>Lathrop, *Migration Into East Texas*, 69. Randolph B. Campbell, "Planters and Plain Folk: Harrison County, Texas, as a Test Case, 1850-1860," *Journal of Southern History*, XL (August, 1974), 383, points out that in at least one East Texas county "the position of small farmers and nonslaveholders relative to large operators and slaveholders declined in every category during the 1850s."